

DAILY NEWS

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U. S. TROOPS HAD TO SHOOT ALLIES***A Tragedy That Was Avoidable***

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DA NANG, South Viet Nam, March 18 — The tragedy of A Shau — where Americans were forced to shoot South Vietnamese—wouldn't have happened if steps had been taken to implement a six-months-old staff study by the Saigon Defense Ministry recommending that the Civilian Irregular Defense Group be abolished, or, as a bare minimum, be integrated into the nation's regular military establishment.

Official military investigation of the incident at A Shau is under way.

¶ Facts Demanded

Washington is keeping the wires hot with demands for facts and explanations. It will be unfortunate and unfair if anyone is made the scapegoat. What happened at A Shau was a military necessity.

A Shau was manned principally by OIDG strikers — or helpers. Most of those killed in order to get our rescue helicopters off ground were CIDG. So were those who defected and turned their guns on their own people and on the handful of Americans in the doomed camp.

The OIDG are civilians. They work under contract at wages better than those paid to the Vietnamese soldiers. They can quit when they want to. They can refuse orders they do not want to obey.

¶ Might Be Shot

On three successive nights last autumn at a Special Forces camp along the Cambodian border,—heard and saw a CIDG commander refuse to go on patrol. He offered no substantial reasons. His men were tired. They had no mosquito nets; they simply did not feel like going; they might be shot and so on.

When we insist on aggressive patrolling the CIDG men just quit, and sign up again at some place where conditions are more to their liking. Which is a hell of a way to run a war.

The CIDG personnel at A Shau surrendered the south wall of the fort without a fight. They went over to the Viet Cong. They fled into the jungle and reappeared when our rescue

helicopters arrived.

They were told that unless they kept their discipline none of them would be rescued. Yet they rushed every helicopter that landed and refused to get off.

¶ Choppers Crashed

Two choppers crashed trying to get airborne. So, as a last resort, orders were issued to shoot.

The Americans were not alone in shooting the mutineers. One CIDG officer tossed a grenade at the mob, killing and wounding 10.

When Marine Lt. Col. Charles A. House, a helicopter squadron commander, ordered his crewmen to shoot so this rescue craft could take off, one CIDG man aboard kissed his hand. Another embraced him. A third fell to his knees and grabbed the colonel around the legs.

The CIDG is a military cancer. No one disputes this. I've talked to many about it, including Gen. William C. Westmoreland. As far back as I can remember, we and the Vietnamese have been "just about set to take action."

The staff study completed in Saigon as early as last autumn urges dissolution of the CIDG and incorporation of its men into the regular armed forces.

¶ 'Wait a While'

But I invariably have been told: "Just wait a while. We must proceed cautiously in these matters. Staff jobs are involved. We've got to be diplomatic and sell the Vietnamese on the idea, and let them think it's their own idea." dea."

Meanwhile, Americans and loyal Vietnamese must fight and die alongside the CIDG. Alongside men they are unable to trust or respect—men who refuse to go on patrols, who go over to the enemy, and turn their guns on their friends.

This is too much to ask of anyone.

"It's time we quit being diplomatic.

It's high time we bust this thing wide open and get the CIDG abolished.

A Shau needn't have happened. But there will be more A Shaus unless we act promptly.